Thule Culture Communal Houses in Labrador

BY PETER SCHLEDERMANN[1]

ABSTRACT. From the study of excavations at Saglek Bay, construction of large rectangular sod-stone and whalebone communal houses by the Thule culture Eskimos in northern Labrador apparently began about the latter half of the seventeenth century. There appears to have been a general trend towards communal living, beginning with the snow-house complex in the central Canadian Arctic during the early part of the Neo-Boreal period. Communal house development in Labrador is seen as an extension of this general trend, serving as an adaptive mechanism in times of social or economic stress. Variation in styles is explained in terms of available construction materials.

RÉSUMÉ. *Les maisons communales de la culture thulée au Labrador.* Il ressort des études des fouilles faites dans la Baie de Saglek que la construction, par des Esquimaux thulés dans le nord du Labrador, de grandes maisons communales rectangulaires en pierres-terre et en fanons de baleine remonte probablement à la deuxième moitié du 17ème siècle.

Il semble qu'il y ait eu une tendance générale vers une vie en communauté, à commencer par ce complexe de maisons de neige dans l'Arctique central canadien durant la première partie de la période néo-boréale.

Le développement de maisons communautaires dans le Labrador est considéré comme un prolongement de cette tendance générale servant de mécanisme d'adaptation en périodes de stress social ou économique. Les variations de styles s'expliquent par la diversité des matériaux de construction disponibles.

Резюме. *Общинные дома периода тулейской культуры на Лабрадоре.* Судя по раскопкам в районе зал. Саглек, сооружение крупных общинных домов прямоугольной формы из дерна, камня и китовых костей было начато жившими на севере Лабрадора эскимосами тулейской культуры приблизительно во второй половине 17 века. Тогда, по-видимому, имела место общая тенденция к общинной жизни, проявившаяся в сооружении в центральной части канадской Арктики комплексов жилищ из снега в ранний нео-бореальный период. Строительство общинных домов на Лабрадоре, рассматриваемое как развитие этой тенденции, служит адаптационным механизмом в периоды социальной и экономической напряженности. Объяснение различий в стилях строительства основывается на доступности строительных материалов.

Large rectangular communal winter dwellings, constructed of sod, stone, whalebone and driftwood have been discussed by several investigators (Holm 1911; Steensby 1910; Thalbitzer 1914; Mathiassen 1931, 1934; Patterson 1939; Holtved 1944; Petersen 1974/75). They have all dealt primarily with communal houses in Greenland during the latter period of their occupation by Eskimos of the Thule culture. Less well known are communal structures once used by Thule Eskimos on the east coast of Labrador. The results of excavations at Saglek Bay, Labrador (Schledermann 1971) indicated a structural evolution from the older, semi-rounded single platform winter dwellings, to larger communal houses capable of accommodating as many as forty individuals.

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DEVELOPMENTS IN LABRADOR

The prehistory of the Saglek Bay region (Fig. 1) prior to the Thule culture occupation has been described by Tuck (1975). The Ikkusik site at Saglek Bay is located on a small island known both as Rose Island and Saglek Island. This and the nearby Tuglavina site together represent a relatively unbroken period of occupation by the Thule culture Eskimos from about 1500 A.D. until about 1915. Several communal structures on the Ikkusik site were examined in order to determine the period of time over which they were occupied. Three of these, designated as Houses A, B and C in the present paper, are illustrated in Figs. 2, 3 and 4. The greatest dimension of each house is usually at right angles to the direction of the entrance passage. The passages are impressive in regard to both length and width, and usually constructed below the level of the central floor area. Excavation revealed a number of small rectangular surfaces projecting out from the sleeping platforms. Although it is possible that these small stone-lined surfaces were "support pillars" or outward extensions of the sleeping platform, with storage rooms beneath, they served, in the view of the present writer, as cooking and lamp platforms, as in the example from Greenland (Fig. 5) sketched by Holm (1911). While the sleeping platform in House C may appear rather narrow, it should be kept in mind that the rear and side walls of many of these structures have,

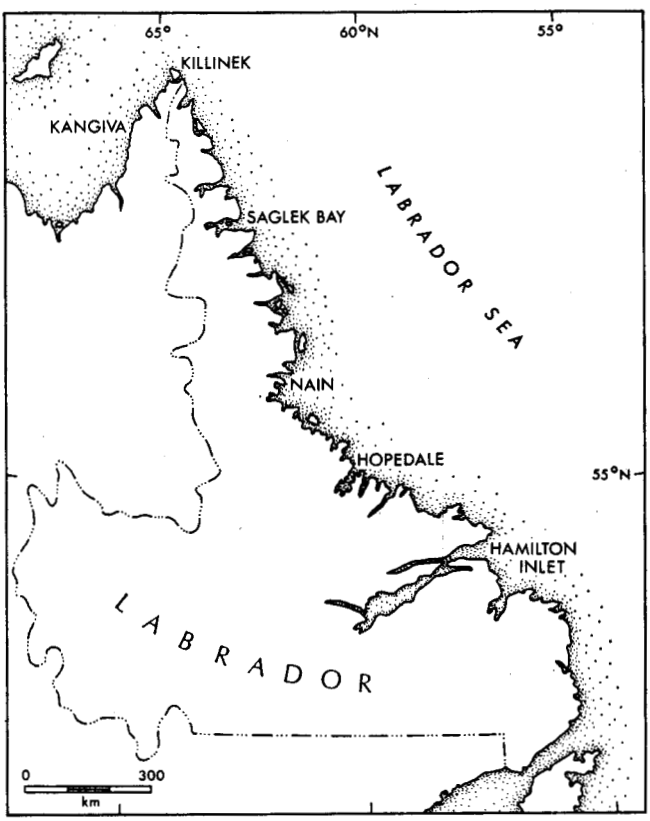


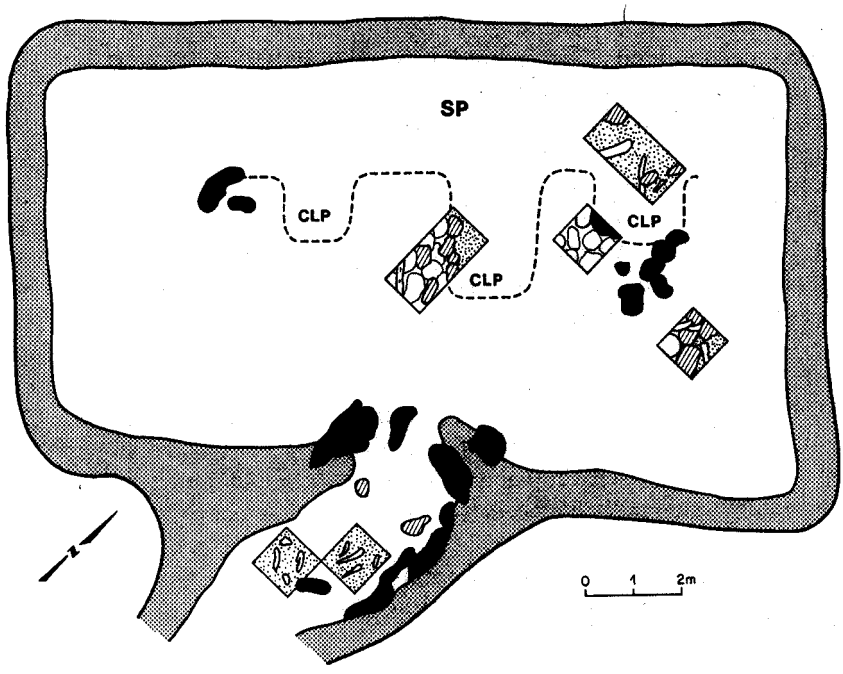
FIG. 1. Locations mentioned in the text.

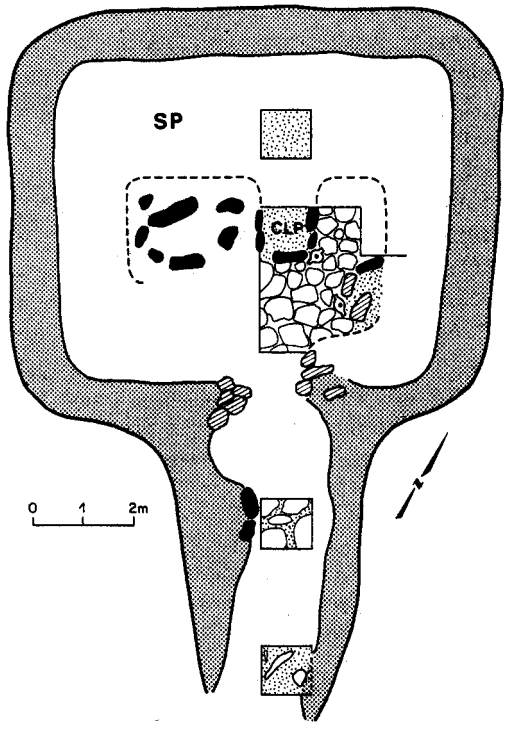
with the passage of time, tended to slump inwards, so that their original outlines have become obscured. The protruding surface in House B is clearly not an extension of the main sleeping platform, which is already more than two metres in width. If the smaller surfaces were meant to serve as extensions of the sleeping platform, a greater uniformity in design might be expected; however, in most of the structures — particularly House A — the protruding platforms vary greatly in both length and width. House C was excavated as extensively as time would permit. Items of Euro-American manufacture were found in it, as well as in all the others, although not in any great quantity. There were knife and harpoon blades, and also rivets, made of iron, while three gunflints — thought to be of English origin — and a wooden toy carving of a rifle indicated that rifles had been used. These finds, together with numerous ceramic and pipe fragments, were examined by D. M. Barber and C. F. Hayes of the Rochester Museum and Science Center, State of New York. The fragments of creamware, pearlware and stoneware were thought to date to between 1770 and 1850, while the kaolin pipe sections appeared from an examination of their stem-bores to belong to the period 1750-1800 (Deetz 1967). Two iron adzes were found in the midden area of one of the communal dwellings. They compare closely with specimens referred to by Quimby (1966 p. 71) in a discussion of French trade goods of the Middle Historic period (1670-1760) from the lower Mississippi Valley.

Bird (1945 p. 133) distinguished between various phases of the Thule culture occupation on the basis of several types of winter houses in the Hopedale area of Labrador. One of these is no doubt of the communal type, although the interior features of the dwelling seem less clearly outlined. The transition to large communal houses in the Hopedale area was estimated by Bird (1945) to have taken place in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Similar communal dwellings have been reported, without detailed descriptions of interior features, from Thule culture sites on Eskimo Island, Hamilton Inlet, Labrador (Fitzhugh 1972 p. 123).

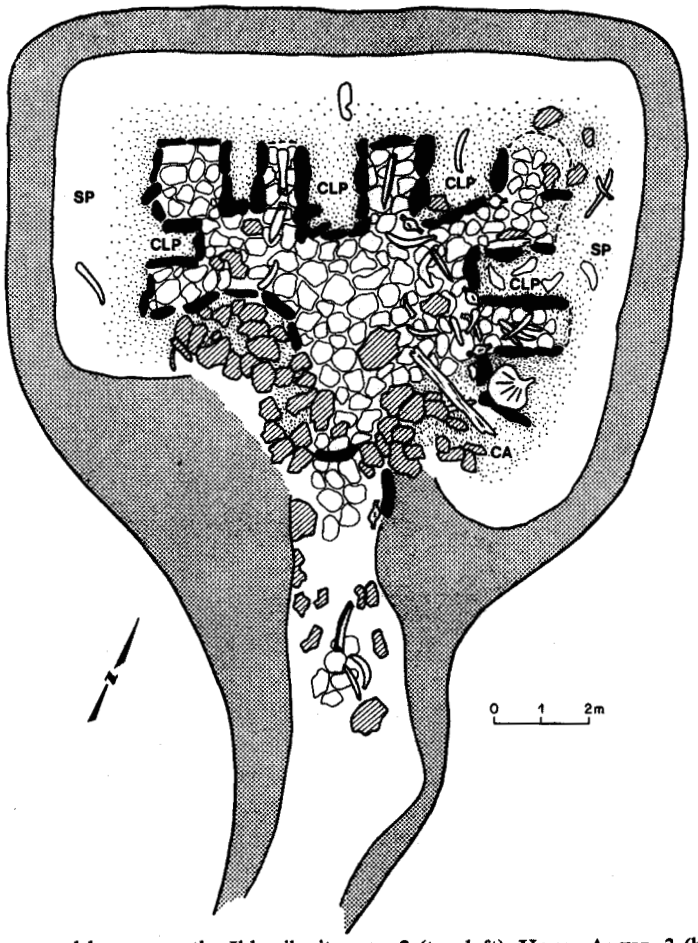
Additional information regarding the use of large communal winter dwellings has been obtained from the records of Moravian missionaries, who founded their first permanent mission in Nain, Labrador, in 1771. According to Kleivan (1966 p. 26) the average number of Eskimos inhabiting each dwelling was about 20. The size of these dwellings decreased following protests by missionaries against crowding and attendant uninhibited practices (Taylor 1968). In 1773, the Moravian missionary, Jens Haven, was told that there were five sod-and-stone winter houses at Killinek (Fig. 1), but only one in use at Kangiva on the east coast of Ungava Bay. At the latter settlement snow houses were the predominant type of winter dwelling according to Hiller (1967) who has also recorded the following observations made by Haven when he and his companions entered Saglek Bay on a sloop in 1773:

> I looked at their houses of which there are four on two islands very badly situated; for two lie on the N.W. corner of a high hill and have no sun in the winter. The land has grass enough but so uneven and rocky that one can scarce walk along. The others stand on a low island about a league farther. There also is grass, dandelion and scurvey grass but it lay open to the sea and there is no harbour.





CA cooking area
CLP cooking and lamp platform
SP sleeping platform
boulders
upright slabs
flagged floor
sod wall
sand
whalebone sections
feature outline
excavation units
driftwood
whale vertebrae
cut bone sections



Plans of communal houses on the Ikkusik site: FIG. 2 (top left), House A; FIG. 3 (bottom left), House B; FIG. 4 (above), House C.

House C may well have been one of the structures Haven described. In the same account he also mentions the eagerness with which the Eskimos attempted to trade baleen, indicating that this was an expected and not uncommon item of barter. Direct contacts between Europeans and Eskimos increased in southern Labrador and Newfoundland at about the middle of the sixteenth century with the arrival of Portuguese and French fishermen (Kleivan 1966 p. 20). Eskimo raids became common, and goods of European manufacture were carried northward in increasing quantities. In 1764, according to Hiller (1967), as many as 18 boatloads of Eskimos went south to rob the Europeans in the area of the Strait of Belle Isle, and supply the whole coast of Labrador as far as Hudson Strait not only with iron ware but boats, sails, anchors and rope, etc. By 1787, the mission at Nain had to stock flints, powder and shot in an attempt to prevent the Eskimos from making such raids (Hiller 1967).

On the basis of various sources of evidence, it would appear that the development of large communal houses in northern Labrador began about 1700, if not

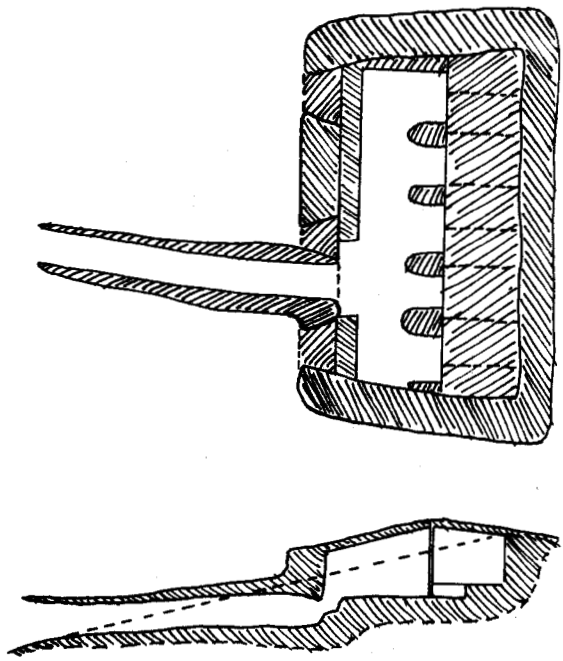


FIG. 5. Sketch of Angmagssalik house from Holm (1911).

earlier. They replaced the smaller, semi-rounded houses. The older winter houses usually contained one or two sleeping platforms and — though the evidence is very limited — there may have been a tendency at the Ikkusik site towards more angular forms of houses, just prior to the development of large communal ones.

In investigating the origins of these communal houses, it may be of advantage to compare contemporaneous events in Greenland. Mathiassen (1934) found that they came into use there about 1650, while Holtved (1944 p. 104) suggested they had been in use from the beginning of the seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century. The present evidence indicates that large communal dwellings had their origin in Greenland, probably around Disko Bay. European contact appears to have preceded the development.

ORIGIN OF THULE CULTURE COMMUNAL HOUSES

Several theories have been propounded with regard to the origin of the communal houses. Thalbitzer (1914) has suggested the influence of Norse architecture; it is, however, difficult to understand why the Eskimos should have taken several hundred years to imitate the Norse building style. The idea that they banded together from fear of Europeans was put forward by Bird (1945) although Mathiassen (1931 p. 129) had dismissed that idea, since he felt that winter settlements were more scattered during this time than they had been. Bird's second suggestion — that the communal houses were copies of European houses, perhaps built by whalers — cannot be substantiated.

European whalers should, perhaps, be regarded as merely incidental to the development of the Thule culture communal house, since large communal dwell-

ings in the Arctic predate that culture. The Choris people of Alaska, for example, lived in large multi-family houses, perhaps as early as 1000 B.C. (Giddings 1967 p. 11). The Dorset people utilized large communal structures for a period of time in Ungava Bay (Plumet 1969), and on western Victoria Island (McGhee 1969), although they may have served as festival houses much as did the Thule culture *kashgee*. Other theories have been advanced for the development of Thule culture communal houses.

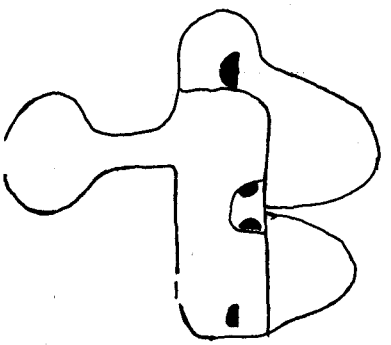


FIG. 6. Sketch of a two-family house from Steensby (1910).

Thule culture winter settlements often demonstrate a tendency towards communal aggregation of which the snow house communities in the central Arctic (Dumas 1969) are good examples. Such a cultural trend may therefore always have existed in the Arctic, and Steensby (1910) suggested it provided an explanation for the changing Thule culture winter house styles. His ideas were partially based on a drawing made by an Eskimo woman which showed a two-family house with a common floor space and passage. In this drawing (Fig. 6), two side platforms are joined to form a small central platform standing out from the dividing walls between the main platforms. If the dividing wall were removed, the interior arrangement of the dwelling would look much like that of the later communal houses, with an extended sleeping platform in the rear, and lamp and cooking platforms protruding into the central floor area. The importance of available building material is also discussed by Steensby (1910 p. 324) with reference to the same drawing:

> A house-type such as shown which is intended for two families, each having a separate main platform and considerably more space than if they shared a simple, single house, has arisen as the expression of the Eskimo tendency to crowd together, a tendency which is binding both in sociological and psychological regards. As soon as the Eskimos can obtain the drift-wood, they have been able to satisfy this tendency, and thus, on the basis of the known house-type built the long house with a single, long, main platform, on which each family has its "berth" or division, separated at the sides only by a hanging skin.

In addition, Holtved (1944 p. 103) has pointed out that the angular compound houses in the Thule district have platforms which, in most cases, join at right angles to each other, whereas in west Greenland the platforms are in line. He further states that "the transition from these parallel houses to the oblong com-

munal houses seems natural once they have assumed the four-sided form, as of course only the partitioning needs to be removed."

Patterson (1939) suggested that "the origin of the large communal house is intimately connected with the conditions prevailing in subarctic regions." The availability of building material was particularly important in the construction and support of large roofs. At house C on the Ikkusik site, several large sections of timber were found which had been either obtained from further south or else selected from available driftwood. The roof structure had incorporated, in addition to these timber sections, large pieces of whalebone, notched and perforated for lashing.

From these observations, it would seem that Eskimos had a tendency to crowd together in order to achieve savings in labour and building material, and "to be content with a house of simple form instead of quite a row of small houses" (Holtved 1944 p. 103). In addition, it would seem that the paucity of available building material restricted the architectural possibilities.

A QUESTION OF SELECTIVE ADAPTATION

If Eskimos did indeed have a tendency towards such patterns of living, the question arises of why it did not manifest itself earlier. The Thule culture Eskimos had inhabited the same region for several hundred years, and through the construction of *kashgee* (or festival houses) had proven their ability to construct large dwellings.

It should be noted that the time span for the Thule culture communal house development roughly coincided with the period of prolonged cooling of the Neo-Boreal (Bryson and Wendland 1967). This covered the approximate time span 1505-1850 A.D. and, according to Dansgaard *et al.* (1970) intensified between about 1600 and 1730. The interaction between climate and culture may therefore be seen as a series of cause and effect relationships which also affected the economy of the Eskimos (Schledermann 1976a). Climatic fluctuations may cause variations in the amount and seasonal distribution of sea ice which, in turn, may affect the availability of certain game species throughout the year. The Eskimos had, therefore, to adapt themselves to these changes, socially and economically, or perish.

Vibe (1967 pp. 88-90) asserted that "around 1600 an alteration in the climate created [a] heavy concentration of ice *north* of Baffin Bay and *north* of Spitzbergen. The Baffin Bay was still open for ships [in] 1616 when Baffin discovered it. When the ice began to advance southwards it was closed . . . In the years 1616-1718, very few whaling ships visited Davis Strait". Under those circumstances the Eskimos could probably no longer depend on the availability of whales.

Robert Petersen (1974/75) related the establishment of the communal house (longhouse) to a reduction in food obtainable by hunting and the consequent need to share it more equally; and the present author has carried out studies to show that there was a serious decline in the amount of whaling (baleen whales) during the Neo-Boreal period which affected the Thule culture settlement patterns in the Canadian Arctic and Greenland. Petersen (1974/75) has shown that the availability of big whales meant an adequate supply of food and fuel for all

members of the community, and little or no incentive to congregate in large houses except on festive occasions. Without the big whales, however, and with increasing dependence on seal hunting, less fortunate families would suffer frequent food shortages and experience problems obtaining fuel for cooking and heating. According to Weyer (1962 p. 176), the incidence of food sharing is largely dependent on the size of the animal, and whales would, therefore commonly be shared by all members of the community. Nansen (1894 p. 113) pointed out that there were a few animals which the hunter could keep for himself and his family — the *atak* or Greenland seal being one of these. In a communal household there would be a greater equality of sharing, since, as Hughes (1958) noted, "all meals in such a house are always shared in by all; even a large seal does not go very far when it is brought home." The inadequacy of fuel supplies for heating could be offset to a large degree by the sharing of a few large dwellings.

Several factors, then, seem to indicate that the changing of the basic pattern of settlement from single to multi-family houses coincided with difficult times. As Weyer (1962 p. 184) stated, "especially in time of stress or scarcity, the Eskimos are apt to resort to communalism". Sharing, facilitated by the occupation of a large single dwelling, was an adaptive practice.

To summarize: it may be seen that several factors must be taken into consideration in explaining the development of communal houses: the tendency of the Thule-culture Eskimos to establish multi-family households (Steensby 1910); the availability of different kinds of construction material such as driftwood, which is found in greater quantity in the near sub-arctic regions; and deteriorating climatic conditions during the Neo-Boreal period, which caused a reduction in the hunting of the large whales, which, in turn, upset the subsistence base of the Eskimo community.

INDEPENDENT PARALLEL DEVELOPMENT

There remains to be considered the question of the striking points of similarity between the communal dwellings in Labrador and those in Greenland; sub-rectangular shape, extended rear sleeping platform, protruding lamp and cooking platforms, and long entrance passages. Present evidence seems to indicate that these dwellings appeared slightly earlier in Greenland. Diffusion seems unlikely to have occurred, but its possibility cannot be dismissed. Although European whalers did operate in the waters of Davis Strait and the Labrador Sea at the time of development of the communal house, and Eskimos were occasionally used as crew members, it is difficult to accept that any wholesale transference of this building style to Labrador took place. Again, diffusion via the northern Baffin Bay region certainly did not take place — on the basis of the archaeological evidence. One of the intermediate areas — Cumberland Sound, Baffin Island — although providing no evidence of large rectangular communal houses, contained a type of communal structure which gives some basis for speculation concerning parallel cultural developments (Schledermann 1976b).

The social and economic advantages of communal habitation in times of hardship have been discussed above in terms of food-sharing practices, and conservation of fuel for heating and cooking. A general trend towards communal living

appears to have begun about the time of the Neo-Boreal in the central Arctic (Schledermann 1976a) with the building of snow-house winter settlements. The use of the latter spread outward from the central Arctic to eventually reach the eastern coastline of Baffin Island and the east side of Ungava Bay. In the eastern Arctic, however, the snow house co-existed with another form of winter dwelling — the skin-covered, sod-walled *quarmat*. From archaeological research in Cumberland Sound, it appears that this structure, which in the central Arctic was used primarily as a fall dwelling, developed into a cloverleaf-shaped communal house along the east coast of Baffin Island, between 1650 and 1700, following a drastic decline in whaling.

It would appear that, in times of socio-economic stress, communal living was resorted to for cultural survival. The architectural similarity in house styles in areas like Greenland and Labrador is perhaps best explained in terms of available construction material, in particular the presence or absence of driftwood. Timber was of prime importance for the construction of roofs of large rectangular dwellings, while the cloverleaf-shaped communal dwellings were formed by the joining together of several smaller rounded dwellings by means of a roof structure based on the support of whale ribs. It has already been pointed out that the protruding lamp and cooking platforms were a natural outcome of joining two or more sleeping platforms (Fig. 6). The present author feels, on the basis of the evidence, that the overall pattern of cultural development is primarily the result of material limitation. Given the limited opportunities for choice in the Arctic, the use of large rectangular communal dwellings in Labrador and Greenland can be explained in terms of a parallel development of socio-economic mechanisms stimulated by changing environmental factors.

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